

## Canada's Lake Poets

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[The next article of this series will deal with "Fields of Canadian Fiction".]

WHEN you open your eyes upon a new landscape, the first impression is more or less of a blur. It is only when you begin to grasp the outstanding features and to assort and classify them, that you get a view which you are able to carry away as a "picture of memory". Similarly, if we are to get a perspective of Canadian literature, we must group and classify Canadian writers. In doing this we shall follow a suggestion made by a writer dealing with Canadian poetry, and distinguish Wilfred Campbell, Archibald Lampman and Duncan Campbell Scott as the leading representatives of the "Great Lakes School". While they all wrote widely on varied themes, we could, possibly, in an attempt to trace the influences that were responsible for their earlier outbursts of song, show convincingly that the fount of the Muses (so far as Canada is concerned) had its hidden springs in our magnificent chain of great lakes.

The dominant note of Wilfred Campbell's verse is shown in the following from "The Hills and The Sea".

"Give me the hills and wide water,  
Give me the heights and the sea;  
And take all else; 'tis living  
And heaven enough for me."

In his nature poems, Campbell has an Epicurean taste for nature's beauties. He is at his best when voicing an intimacy and enjoyment of nature which is entirely free from Wordsworthian sermonising.

His "Lake Lyrics" combine simplicity and effectiveness of language with the genuine ring of true appreciation of what is being described. There is sweet melody and keen human intimacy with nature presented in "Vapor and Blue":

Domed with the azure of Heaven,  
Floored with a pavement of pearl;  
Clothed all about with a brightness  
Soft as the eyes of a girl.

Here where the jewels of nature  
 Are set in the light of God's smile,  
 Far from the world's wide throbbing  
 I will stay me and rest awhile.

And store in my heart old music  
 Melodies gathered and sung  
 By the genies of love and beauty,  
 When the heart of the world was young.

A characteristic Canadian lake picture is presented in "Lake Huron" from which we quote a single stanza:

Miles and miles of crimson glories,  
 Autumn's wondrous fires ablaze;  
 Miles of shoreland red and golden—  
 Drifting into dream and haze.

Although we regard the Great Lakes as the inspiration of Campbell's nature verse, we must remember that he wrote other poetry of a more serious nature. His poems of deeper thought express an intimate knowledge of human nature and show a careful appreciation of dramatic values. Such poems as "Lines on a Skeleton", "The Violin", "Unabsolved", and "The Poetical Tragedies" move us with deep and noble impulses. In "Unabsolved" we have a dramatic picture of the soul-benumbing influence of the great "lifeless" North, and the anguish of the traveller whose cowardice doomed the Franklin party to destruction. This strikingly powerful monologue, which represents the remorse-stricken man as reciting his story to his father confessor, is akin in theme and mood to the "Ancient Mariner". An extract that discovers to us the bleakness of the man's soul, the biting remorse that conjures up all the coldness, dreariness, and ugliness of the circumstances surmounting his crime, is this:

Long day by day a desolation went  
 Where our wan faces fared, o'er all that waste:  
 And I was young and filled with love of life,  
 And fear of ugly death as some weird black,  
 The enemy of love and youth and joy;  
 A lonely, ruined bridge at edge of night,  
 Fading to blackness at the outer end.  
 And those were cold, stern men I went with there,  
 Who held their lives as men do hold a gift  
 Not worth the keeping; men who told dread tales  
 That made a madness in me of that waste  
 And all its hellish, lonely solitude

And set my heart a-beating for the south,  
 Until that awful desolation ringed  
 My reason round, and shrunk my fearful heart.  
 Yea, father—I had saved them but for this;—  
 Why did they send me on alone, ahead,  
 Poor me, the only weak one of that band  
 Who was too much of coward to show my fear?  
 Why did life give me that mad fear of death  
 To make me coward at the very last?  
 Why did God give these men into my hand  
 And leave them victim to a craven fear  
 That walked the lonely wastes in form of man?

In his "Sagas of Vaster Britain" will be found many poems which sing very suitably our loyalty to the motherland in the present crisis.

Archibald Lampman is not so truly a "Lake poet" as Campbell, if we are considering the actual singing of lake themes, but he is even more than Campbell, Canada's nature poet. He sings all the moods of the Canadian seasons, all the beauties of our native forests, all the delights of our wide landscapes and in fact, in nearly every poem he wrote, he drew his inspiration from his observation of phases of nature, or used a nature setting for a background.

His own theory of poetry is hinted at in many places throughout his writings, but nowhere so clearly put as in "The Poet's Song", in which he describes the poet grown silent and listless in the glare of the city palace:

As listless as the hour, alone  
 The poet by his broken lute  
 Sat like a figure in the stone  
 Dark-browed and mute.

To the messenger who bids him come and cheer the king, the poet cries:

Go show the King this broken lute!  
 Even as it is, so am I.  
 The tree is perished to its root,  
 The fountain dry.

An unrest seizes him and the poet breaks from the palace, leaves the city far behind, and makes his way to the heart of nature, so that:

That night, when the fierce hours grew long,  
 Once more the monarch, old and gray,  
 Called for the poet and his song,  
 And called in vain. But far away

By the wild mountain gorges stirred  
 The shepherds in their watches heard,  
 Above the torrents charge and clang,  
 The cleaving chant of one who sang.

So, too, with our poet, Lampman. He sought not his themes or his material from the din and strife of the city, but from the quiet of rural scenes or from the majestic movements of nature.

Many, especially of his shorter poems, are almost pure word paintings. There is no attempt at spiritual or moral interpretation—the scene, the mood is presented to the reader and he can make his own application. Typical poems of this class are “Winter Uplands”, a clear, vivid picture of a frosty moonlight night; and again, just the opposite of this in “Heat”, which fairly scorches with the glare of the hot July sun.

Lampman's joy in nature never seems to have been a boisterous one, but rather dreamy, quiet and contemplative. His philosophy of life probably sums itself up in:

There is a beauty at the goal of life,  
 A beauty growing since the world began,  
 Thro' every age and race, thro' lapse and strife,  
 Till the great human soul complete her span,  
 Beneath the waves of storm that lash and burn,  
 The currents of blind passion that appal.  
 To listen and keep watch till we discern  
 The tide of sovereign truth that guides it all;  
 So to address our spirits to the height,  
 And so attune them to the valiant whole,  
 That the great light be clearer for our light,  
 And the great soul the stronger for our soul;  
 To have done this is to have lived, tho' fame  
 Remember us with no familiar name.

Duncan Campbell Scott has published several volumes of verse, containing poems marked by high descriptive power and evincing an inherent sense of music. His themes have much the same range as those of Campbell and Lampman, dealing with various aspects of Canadian nature and also with subjects of deep seriousness. A distinctive feature of his work is found in his poems on Indian life and character in which he interprets for us the views and feelings of the aboriginal race or individual.

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Teacher—What lesson do we learn from the busy bee?  
 Tommy Tuffnut—Not to get stung.